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SUBJECT: NO NEWS FLASH: SCHOOLS IN PANJ, TAJIKISTAN NEED HELP

¶1. Summary: In Panj district in southern Tajikistan, the educational system fails to meet the basic needs of a poor rural community. A February 8 visit to a secondary school in the district capital and a primary school in a rural village demonstrated that Panj students still need better teachers, books and facilities to become productive members of Tajikistan's economy. Panj represents yet another place where a Peace Corps presence could have a meaningful impact. End Summary.

¶2. At the District Lyceum, cheerful students warmly greeted visiting EmbOffs but struggled to answer simple questions in English or Russian classes. The English teacher looked puzzled and did not understand short questions about his name and his students. The 8th form students were working from the 6th form books, and only a handful felt confident enough to say their names and their favorite subject in school. Working from shared primers, most students seemed to be memorizing rote English phrases. In the Russian classroom, most students chose to answer their Tajik teacher in Tajiki.

¶3. Students in the Lyceum's government-provided computer lab worked diligently, typing English phrases into six computers. Although Panj has no internet connection, the government-funded computers provided students with basic exposure to Windows and Microsoft Word. (Note: The school director referred to the computers as a "gift from the President's fund," despite the fact that there is no President's fund, just taxpayer money from the budget. End Note.)

¶4. In contrast to the computer center at the Lyceum, the primary school in Kuldimon "jamoat" (subdistrict) founded in 1940 had mud floors, cracked walls and no wiring for electricity. At 11 in the morning, the school rooms were dim, lit only by sunlight through small windows. Young students copied passages from their Tajik textbooks into notebooks, but had difficulty reading them out loud, perhaps because they could barely see in the poor light. The teachers noted they had a limited ability to accommodate the handful of Uzbek students, who were separated in a small classroom of mixed ages.

¶5. Comment: Panj is another good example of how a Peace Corps English teacher could make an extraordinary difference in a system with limited resources. A lack of English language skills already prevents many Tajiks from taking advantage of education and professional exchanges, but if the Panj Lyceum is any indication, Tajik students from rural areas are also losing their ability to speak Russian, the region's lingua franca. The exodus of ethnic Russians during the Civil War means most Tajik students no longer learn from native speakers. Post's reduced educational assistance budget is committed to pilot programs in

other districts, and its program implementers will unlikely be able to expand its programs to cover the Panj region in the near future. End Comment.

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